The Qualia Comparability Hypothesis - Better than Mary and The Zombies

Philosophy of mind has spent decades circling the same landmarks: **zombies** — beings physically identical to us but without consciousness — and **Mary**, the neuroscientist who knows every physical fact about colour yet supposedly learns something new the moment she sees red. These and similar thought experiments aim to show that mind is more than just matter, that consciousness resists reduction to the purely physical.

All of them depend on a strange and rarely questioned assumption:

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That imagination is enough.

If you can picture it, the tradition says, then it's "logically possible," and if it's logically possible, it counts as evidence.

This has always struck me as odd. Analytic philosophy demands fierce precision when analysing language, knowledge, and justification — yet casually accepts metaphysical scenarios that break science, stretch logic, or rely on omniscience. It rejects ambiguity in ordinary sentences but embraces impossible worlds. It often treats empirical uncertainty as a defect but takes modal fantasy as insight.

And then, one afternoon in my A-Level classroom, something remarkable happened.

A student casually proposed a thought experiment that, in my opinion, is more coherent, more grounded, and more illuminating than any possible world scenario. I didn't realise straight away that she was seriously contributing to the discussion — she just seemed to be thinking aloud.

Testing Qualia in a Controlled Environment

She said something like this:

Suppose, one day, minds could be recreated inside a virtual environment — uploaded, simulated, or instantiated in a system that preserved their functional structure. Not copied magically, not duplicated without cause, but instantiated in a way that respected the information-processing architecture of the biological mind.

A mind reproduced *in* a new medium rather than *dependent on* the old one.

Not science fiction.
Not magic.

Just a mainstream view of cognitive science taken seriously: that **consciousness depends on organisation, not matter.**

Now imagine that inside this environment, researchers could deliver **identical, controlled experiential triggers**:

• a standardised pain-signal
• a calibrated pleasure-signal
• a clearly defined sensation

Two (or more) uploaded minds receive **exactly the same internal cause**.
They then compare it to their ordinary, biological experience of pain.

Adjust. Calibrate. Refine. Repeat.

Eventually: **convergence.**

“Yes — that’s pain.”
“Yes — that feels the same as ordinary biological pain.”

At that point, something extraordinary happens:

Subjective experience becomes comparable.
Not perfectly measurable — but *comparable.*
Not directly visible — but *standardisable.*

Qualia are no longer sealed away in private, inaccessible subjectivity. They become something we can talk about meaningfully, because they track causes we can share and control.

A Zombie-Slaying Thought Experiment

This does not solve the metaphysical problem of other minds — the demand for absolute, Cartesian certainty that another consciousness exists. Nothing can. That demand belongs to a conception of knowledge that no method can satisfy.

But it *does* dissolve the everyday epistemic worry. If identical internal triggers produce convergent experiential reports, then experience is no longer unreachable in principle. It becomes comparable — the kind of thing that can be aligned, contrasted, and discussed.

This weakens the idea that qualia are inherently ineffable, or that inner experience is cognitively meaningless. It drains intuitive force from zombie and inverted-spectrum arguments, both of which depend on experience being completely beyond comparison, and it offers support to any view that ties experience to organisation rather than metaphysical essence — without requiring a commitment to physicalism or functionalism.

But above all, it reframes the problem of other minds. Instead of an impossible demand for certainty, it becomes a question about the conditions under which different minds would experience things similarly. A tractable question, not an eternal puzzle. Unlike zombies and Mary, this thought experiment respects everything we know from neuroscience, AI, psychology, and cognitive science. It is imaginative, but it is also coherent — and that combination turns out to be surprisingly powerful.

Do We Learn Anything New From This Thesis?

It is a grounded antithesis to the conceivability arguments that currently carry so much weight, and it exposes a deep tension within analytic philosophy — a discipline strict about epistemology but indulgent about modal metaphysics. It is a discipline that demands clarity in arguments and claims, yet is relatively accepting of fantastical scenarios, as long as they pass a vague test of “conceivability.”

But conceivability is not a guide to possibility. If it were, telepathy, sentient rocks, and perpetual-motion machines would all remain on the table.

Mind-upload scenarios, by contrast, require no violations of physics or logic. They rest only on substrate independence — and most people already believe some version of that, whether they realise it or not.

This isn’t a solution to consciousness.
It doesn’t prove physicalism.
It doesn’t shortcut the hard problem.

What it offers is much simpler:

It shows that subjective experience is not conceptually beyond investigation. It suggests that qualia appear private because we lack tools to compare them. It reveals that “inner life” may not be as sealed and impenetrable as we once assumed. And it exposes how many analytic puzzles persist not because they are deep, but because they rely on imaginative excess rather than conceptual necessity.

If two minds could one day receive the same internal stimulus and describe it in the same way, then qualia stop being a metaphysical mystery and begin to look like something else entirely: **data.**

The bell rang. Chairs scraped; bags were packed. Someone asked whether zombies got homework — and whether they had any. As they filed out with cheerful goodbyes, I was still trying to formulate a response.

That evening, I realised that the most radical and significant idea in the room had come and gone with barely a ripple. A student — not a professor, not a philosopher in an Oxford common room — had outlined a method for comparing experience directly. She had

bypassed decades of metaphysical indulgence with one comment that wasn't even intended as a theory. So I wrote this essay.

Perhaps future debates won't revolve around beings who cannot exist, or neuroscientists who know more physics than the universe allows. Perhaps future philosophy of mind will return to what Descartes promised — and what neuroscience now illuminates: an empirical investigation of thinking beings.

If so, the shift won't have begun in a seminar on modal logic. It will have begun here — in a noisy sixth-form classroom, where a student casually rescued consciousness from the prison analytic philosophy built for it.

Assuming anybody notices.